

### **Informational Sheet: The Place of Modernism**

The following outline was created in consultation with Sheryl Greene at Big Rapids High School when we combined her sculpture class with my American literature class.

Modernism may be viewed as a continuation of the reaction that romanticism made in the 1880s against the classical tradition in Art and Literature. The impact of Darwinism, urbanization of the population, the devastation of World War I, the confusion of imperialism, and the emancipation from Puritanism were the driving social forces that spurred the modernist position.

- I. *Some of the tenets of the classical tradition*
  - A. Classical works were clearly spelled out for the viewer in their entirety.
  - B. Classical works reflected cultural heritage via cultural reference. (Biblical, etc.)
  - C. These cultural referents were often easily identified in a work due to the presence of symbolic objects.
  - D. The “meaning” of these works was often communicated through a plot that depended upon cultural reference for full understanding.
  - E. The works often proclaimed the values of moderation and dignity.
  - F. These values were typically communicated via a hero or heroine who exemplified the values.
  - G. Due to all the cultural overlays and clarity of meaning, a criticism leveled at classicism is that the works are too “perfect.”
- II. *The romantic reaction away from classicism*
  - A. Romantic works encouraged the primacy of individual feelings.
  - B. They dealt with the issues of independence and the importance of the individual.
  - C. Romantic works stressed the “return” to nature.
  - D. The primary message was that nature speaks to the soul and can serve as its teacher.
  - E. The romanticists respected science, but were suspicious of it.
- III. *Modernism takes the romantic reaction to a rebellion level against classicism*
  - A. Writers and poets wanted to deal with ontological problems. (Questions with no direct answers)
  - B. Works often did not attempt to depict. They themselves became the experience.
  - C. Works rather than standing for something “WERE” that something.
  - D. In this attempt to “BE,” works demanded more from the viewer.

- E. The viewer needed to have a willingness to actively participate with the work.
- F. Works often tried to find a place for humans in a world perceived in which neither man nor God was the center.
- G. Works “challenged the mind and aesthetic sensibility” rather than “deceiving the eye and exacting tribute for “miracles of the pen.” (Picasso)